

# A tour of Latin America, no passport required

by Cristina Schreil, qboro editor | Posted: Thursday, April 9, 2015 10:30 am

At the front of a room lined with children's books, two guitars, their players dressed in deep cerulean, trill melodies from long ago. Always in sync, one hums a steady gallop of rich lower notes that harmonize with the other's longing song that cascades like waterfalls in an ebb and flow of emotion.

While audience members weren't lounging on a Caribbean beach or sipping velvety coquito in Old San Juan, the music filling Sunnyside Library last Saturday conjured a convincing-enough auditory journey to the isle of Borinquen, America's vibrant commonwealth that spawned a rich — albeit different — Puerto Rican culture here. Yet the instrumental music that Lisa Spraragen and Josue Perez played with engrossing emotion and skill, their fingers tickling strings as if human digits were always meant to, is far from the reggaeton, bachata and salsa that pumps from clubs and front stoops today. Their music is from an older time.

"We represent an instrumental style," Spraragen said following the performance. She said that Perez, a Puerto Rico native, insists that whatever they play, the set must feature the guitar and its melodies.

These sparse guidelines clash with the layered richness of the duo's diverse repertoire. In addition to the traditional Puerto Rican songs they performed at the library, written by composers who studied classical Spanish forms in Europe long ago, they spanned geography in their one-hour set, "making a little loop," as Spraragen said. They played delicate danzas, a Peruvian waltz and a Colombian cumbia by Tabaco y Ron. They also played "Madrigal" by famous Puerto Rican composer Don Felo. Audience members sang along to the haunting melody, which crept in and pulled out, like a wave building in speed until finally breaking.

The auditory quest the two guitarists invited the audience on mirrored diversity of Puerto Rico itself. The colonial island, which has long acted as a cultural sponge saturated with a colorful history, has absorbed African, European and native Taino customs.

Spraragen herself seems to parallel the island's and the guitar's malleability; audience members approached her after the performance, trying to dissect her heritage — "Are you Colombian? Or are you from Spain?" one woman inquired — but she describes herself as probably the first in her family to know any Spanish.

She and Perez began playing flamenco and Brazilian guitar at restaurants, nightclubs and festivals in the '80s. They now have five CDs and Perez composes his own songs. The two feel out the audience and improvise their song-list.

The introduction of one of Perez's compositions, "Tocame," invited oohs and aahs from the Spanish-



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ARTS, CULTURE & LIVING

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speaking audience. The word, which literally translates to “Play me” in a musical context but also can mean the more provocative “Touch me,” brings a playful layer to the longing ballad. Perez, his face twisting with emotion as he wringed notes to life, played an alluring melody while Spraragen strummed a warm foundation of harmonizing chords.

Audience participation was a key element, with Spraragen proffering maracas or instructing clapping rhythms. She also danced flamenco, which she said she delved into to better understand the art of guitar. Especially for fans of Spanish guitar and all its New World permutations, the concert had the allure of the art form but also the added joy of seeing the musicians at work: Perez’s fingers magically found milliseconds in which to tap a rhythm on the side of the guitar while playing and Spraragen’s skirt sailed during her dances.

The concert was one of many cultural forays into different types of world music and other nations lined up at various branches of the Queens Library this spring. The Russian Festival, a celebration of Russian culture that features sculpted clay fairy tale characters, theater and music, takes place on April 12 at the Flushing Library. The Evolution of African Dance will be at the Baisley Park Library on April 27 at 5 p.m. And there will be a performance of Brazilian Dance by the Silva Dance Company on May 2 in Flushing.

Lisa y Josue also have another concert in Queens coming up: Guitarrazon, or “Guitar Reason,” will be at the Woodside Library on April 28 at 3:30 p.m.

### **Guitarrazon**

**When: Tues., April 28, 3:30 p.m.**

**Where: Woodside Library**

**4-22 Skillman Ave.**

**Entry: Free;**

**queenslibrary.org**